

RIKA NOGUCHI
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For Americans who came of age in the '70s and '80s, it's hard to think of Japan as anything other than the country that conquered the world—economically, at least. Their cars were better than ours; their yen more powerful than our dollar. But the Japan of those decades has devolved into something else: a country racked by recession, natural disaster, crime, and attacks by genocidal terrorist groups. So while Japan's most celebrated contemporary artist, Mariko Mori, shows us the country of the postwar economic miracle—a high-tech, cybersavvy, moneyed world power—Rika Noguchi, a young Tokyo-based photographer, might be a more suitable spokesperson for the nation at the end of the twentieth century.

Interestingly, Japan itself doesn't make an appearance in these photographs. Instead, the show was filled with images of Brazil, the Netherlands, and the US. Noguchi's works are deceptively simple: Most here were landscapes with horizon lines that cut across the lower third of the photograph. Some of her subjects are so prosaic they hardly seem worth the effort. The "Dreaming of Babylon" series, 1998–2000, includes images of an avenue running parallel to the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway; a man, seen from the rear, walking up an anonymous street in an outer borough of New York; a truck in a car wash in Brazil.

Noguchi's photographs are similar in many respects to the work of German conceptualists like Andreas Gursky, Thomas Struth, Thomas Ruff, and Candida Höfer: unblinking documents that, by virtue of their banality, call into question the very concept of documentary photography. But while the German artists are prone to jacking up the color and digitally tweaking details to create increasingly extravagant eye candy, Noguchi's work is lit by mild, everyday light, never enhanced or altered. Her greatest affinity with the Germans is actually more immaterial—or spiritual. Her spare photograph of a shirtless man standing on an unidentified rocky seashore (*Dreaming of Babylon 19*, 1999–2000) calls to mind Caspar David Friedrich's *Monk by the Sea*, 1809–10, while the 1999–2000 "New Land" photographs are even more Friedrichian: expansive views of sandy construction sites that

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Rika Noguchi, *Dreaming of Babylon 10*, 1998–2000, color photograph, 28 x 28".

turn out to be islands near Amsterdam being constructed by the Dutch government. Perhaps the most "sublime" of the stripped-down works in the show captured a crane (the Japanese symbol of health and long life) lifting off over a dinghy floating in a polluted Brazilian bay.

Noguchi's work conjures a raft of art-historical references beyond Friedrich: Dan Graham's 1965 "Homes for America," which offered a view of the then-new prefab American landscape; the documentary "non-subjectivity" of Walker Evans; and Hiroshi Sugimoto, another contemporary Japanese photographer reliant (in his earlier works, at least) on horizon lines. But it is the nineteenth-century Romantic painters, agents of escape not only to other places but also to other mental and spiritual domains, who are Noguchi's true muses. Late-twentieth-century Japan serves as the backdrop to her photographs in the same way early-nineteenth-century Europe did for the Romantics: It is, in a sense, the subject just outside the frame. Noguchi's spare and elemental work is filled with images of decay and resurrection, construction and renewal: metaphors, perhaps, for the "new land" Japan was thought to have become—and might become again.

—Martha Schwendener